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THE NEW POETIC DRAMA.

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

WHATEVER doubts the mature observer of himself may have as to his power of enjoying poetry, he can have few or none as to the exacting character of his taste in it. In the absence of other means of accounting for my preferences, I wish to put forward this theory in explanation of my comparative liking for Mr. Stephen Phillips's two poetic dramas, "Paolo and Francesca" and "Herod," and my comparative misliking for M. Edmond Rostand's two romanticistic melodramas, "Cyrano de Bergerac" and "L'Aiglon." If the theory will not approve itself as sound to others, it will, at least, convince me of my own sincerity, if not my authority in the matter; and, when all is said, it may leave the reader to his own unbiased judgment of the two playwrights.

I.

The prime difficulty in the way of the Anglo-Saxon critic who wishes to estimate a piece of French literature aright, is that he is not French; and yet this does not seem always to beset him. It seems quite possible for him to feel the reality in such work as Flaubert's, the De Goncourts', Zola's and Maupassant's, all of like epic quality; and why should not he feel the unreality in such work as Feuillet's, Cherbuliez's, Ohnet's and Rostand's, all of like melodramatic quality?

Whether he can or not, I shall always have my opinion that from the first I thought "Cyrano de Bergerac" of about the same ethical validity as an American historical fiction. Of course, it implied indefinitely more literary skill than our ingenuous rubbish; but, all the same, in motive, character and sentiment, it was tinsel. The skill was more apparent in reading than in seeing the play. In the closet, the weak points were much more safeguarded than on the stage. There, the dull, kind fellow to whom

Cyrano sacrifices Roxane together with himself, appears more dull than kind; but the book shows him more kind than dull. His instincts are so modest and so generous, that he is worthy a better fate than being a foil to such a swashbucklering sentimentalist as Cyrano. He is, in fact, the saving grace of the piece, which, stripped to the naked ugliness of its main motive, is the action of a man, supposed of genius, of delicacy, of honor, of loyalty, who can betray the charming girl he loves to her passion for an intellectual inferior, because he morbidly fancies that, with a nose like his, he can never win her for himself. Cyrano is bound by everything that can bind a gentleman to save Roxane from her infatuation for Christian. But he sets all his powers to work in promoting it; makes love to her for his rival; marries his poor cousin to a man in whose person she adores Cyrano's mind; and, when he goes away to the war with Christian, writes back to her in Christian's name the beautiful letters which keep her deluded. One is ashamed to state a situation so artistically puerile, so morally atrocious, as if one became *particeps criminis* in confessing one's knowledge of it.

The setting of a nature so misshapen as Cyrano's is a gaudy and extravagant theatraclism, full of bold bloodshed and swagger picturesqueness; with the coming and going of loosely relevant figures, full of the Period in their costumes at least; and with a company of Gascon cadets risen from the dregs of Dumas's musketeers. The whole concludes in a sort of Thackerayesque after-glow (fifteen years after), with the widowed Roxane embroidering in a convent garden, and Cyrano coming periodically to visit her. Against a tree, opportunely dropping its autumnal leaves, he props himself on the occasion of his last visit; and, in reading to Roxane one of her husband's letters, involuntarily betrays that he, Cyrano, was the writer of it, and of all poor Christian's letters. Then he dies in the act of meeting death with a drawn sword, while his bandaged head reveals his death-wound, a lackey, bribed by one of his many enemies, having dropped a billet of wood on him from an upper window, as Cyrano passed.

II.

This, in summary, is the melodrama whose weak points are defended by so many clever devices of the author, that, as I say, the piece reads less offensively than it plays. The carpentry is

indeed admirably perfect; but what fills one with despair for the human race, is that carpentry should still be the acceptable thing with it. In a world which has had Shakespeare for three hundred years, and in an age which has seen the simple sublimity of living growth in Ibsen, carpentry is still overwhelmingly the preference of the theatre—and its public.

It is not strange that it should be the preference of the theatre; that is the home of make-believe, and it remains true to its traditions; and M. Rostand has fulfilled at least his mechanical duty in giving it a play which is mechanically very effective. Apparently, he gave it out of the innocent corruption of his own taste, which was depraved by false ideals of art, but which was not consciously false in "*Cyrano de Bergerac*."

One suspects something more of conscious depravity in the falsehood of "*L'Aiglon*," as if the author had taken counsel from the theatre for his aberrations from taste in the treatment of the poor little *Duc de Reichstadt*. A curious point in the psychology of the piece is that, intellectually, it is of the measure of a boy whose mind has been so dwarfed that, at eighteen, he has only a precocious child's conceptions and ideals of life. The play is as if imagined by the son of Napoleon dreaming, in the tutelage of Austrian diplomacy, of restoring that French empire which his father created and destroyed, while he amuses his inexorable captivity with the toy soldiers which he is scarcely allowed to pretend are French soldiers. He pervades it with his puerility so thoroughly that M. Rostand seems to stand in abeyance, and leave it to the limited personality which he has constructed, and which, in turn, apparently constructs the other personalities. There is a *Marie Louise*, motived and characterized as the severe morality of a brilliant child would have her; a bad, bad *Mettternich*, as the poor boy would have seen him; a beautiful and magnanimous countess and cousin, as he would have had such a kinswoman; a much-masquerading old French grenadier, of like origin and texture; a good *Fanny Ellsler*, sent to corrupt the young dreamer, but really abetting him in his designs of escaping and returning to France; and so on. It is all very curious; and, if the piece were narrative and told in the boy's own person, it would be even important; but in the dramatic form, it seems to give the measure of the author's mind as well as the creature's.

The finest thing in the play is that passage which ensues when the young Napoleon is left alone on the field of Wagram, which he had made the rendezvous of his fellow conspirators in organizing his expedition to France, and when, after the detection and defeat of his scheme, he begins to hear the solemn voices of the dead who died there to give his father victory. They are the very simple and natural voices of wounded and dying men, calling for water, for help, and complaining of their hurts, but not such voices as the conqueror can hear with complacency. It is a very touching and beautiful passage, and itself sufficiently attests the right of M. Rostand to be accepted as a genuine poet. But it is essentially lyrical; at its most poetical, it is subjective. It loses quality when the poet tries to turn it to dramatic account, as if to make it a party to some actress's exploitation of the situation. It is in vain that those voices change from wails of anguish to cries of battle; they do not then convince as before; and as a whole and finally, "*L'Aiglon*" does not convince. It leaves one without doubt that M. Rostand is a deft and skilful playwright, but with question whether he is so much more as to be a dramatist of great promise. His prime gift appears to be lyrical; and it is his lyricism which compensates the sentimentalism of "*Cyrano de Bergerac*" and dignifies the puerility of "*L'Aiglon*."

III.

I have hinted my conjecture that M. Rostand lends himself to the theatre, that arch-enemy of the drama; and I have to confess a like painful misgiving as to Mr. Stephen Phillips. I may be quite wrong, but in reading this poet's tragedy of "*Herod*," I had an uncomfortable sense as of the presence of a third party, which, upon closer examination of my consciousness, appeared to be an actor. It was as if the poet had taken instruction of the player, whose business it is most strictly and obediently to take instructions of the poet, if their common art is to prosper in forms of permanent beauty. The poet, to this end, may indeed humbly and carefully study the stage, but mainly to save himself from its falsity, and learn how to bend its traditions to his own veracity. He cannot know it too well, in order to make himself its master; but he had better not learn it at all, if he intends to make it his master. His affair is supremely with the literary side of the

drama. It is the subordinate affair of the actor to adapt himself to the poet's conception, and find it theatraicable.

I should like to insist upon this, at a time when the literary drama has given novel proof of its vitality in the work of M. Rostand and of Mr. Phillips; but very likely it is not necessary. The powers concerned will settle it between themselves, without reference to criticism; and I may have enough to do in supporting the thesis that Mr. Phillips's is a more dramatic talent than M. Rostand's; that is, he is at his best dramatic, and M. Rostand is at his best lyrical, and ekes out his minor dramatic force with his knowledge of the theatre.

Mr. Phillips's "Paolo and Francesca" affects me like a dramatic poem, written as independently of the theatre as if the theatre had not existed. One may say that, for the purposes of the stage, it has the vices inherent in such a poem, but its vices, if not Shakespearean, are Elizabethan. They are of the "spacious times," and he has in everything Englished the pathetic Italian story. This had been done more than once before, notably by Leigh Hunt, who cast it in narrative form, and I mean nothing depreciative, but wholly the contrary, in saying that Mr. Phillips's tragedy reminds one of the heroic couplets of Leigh Hunt, rather than the *terze rime* of Dante Alighieri. It could not be Italian any more than it could be medieval; one civilization is not possible to another, as one age is not possible to another. We can conceive of the heart-rending story on medieval and Italian terms if we read it in Dante, but if we read it in Phillips, we conceive of it on actual and English terms. It will not do to say how near to the mood of his savage time is the stoic anguish of the poet who heard Francesca tell her piteous story in that whirl of Hell, where he saw her rapt with Paolo. But one may safely say that the dramatic poem of Mr. Phillips, like the narrative poem of Hunt, is interfused with the sympathy of a race whose heart has grown tenderer in the six hundred years elapsed since Dante's nature lost its iron self-control in his swoon of compassion. It is English and modern, and the better for being English and modern; for the world is now abler to feel all the exquisite implications and extenuations of such a story than ever before.

IV.

"L'Aiglon" triumphed on our stage, not because it was power-

ful, but because it was Napoleonic, and not through the Bonapartist history, but through the Bonapartist tradition, which was and will always remain alive in the popular heart. It lived by force of association in the hearts of the witnesses. The average witness, however, has no association with Herod, except the scriptural association, and the "Herod" of Mr. Phillips is of profane and not of sacred inspiration. It might as well, and, indeed, might better, be called by any other name, so far as the people who fill the theatres are concerned. These know the Herod who commanded the innocents to be massacred and John the Baptist beheaded; but they never heard of the Herod who married Mariamne of the Maccabees, and ordered her brother Aristobulus to be murdered.

They are obliged to ask themselves if there were two Herods; and the result is a mental confusion, and a final resentment, as of people who have been trifled with.

These would be the vulgar conditions of a popular failure of the piece, at least with us; though in London the play-going public may be more enlightened. On the literary side of tragedy, which does not touch the theatre or is farthest from it, I am afraid I cannot find "Herod" much more promising of remembrance. It affects me as artificial in treatment and conscious in origin; and, so far as I can see, it contributes to literature no new and interesting characterization.

The "Paolo and Francesca" did do this in one instance, if in no other. *Lucrezia degl' Onesti* is a personality added to one's associations with the original group of actors in the tragic fact. She is the more genuinely an addition because she is modern and not medieval. In fact, all the others are modernized, and this was as inevitable as it was impossible that *Lucrezia* should be medievalized. If she had been truly of the twelfth century (if it was the twelfth century that the rest were of), she might have relented towards *Francesca*, but only after *Francesca* was dead; she never would have been a mother to her while she lived. *Francesca* herself is tenderly and sweetly re-imagined by the poet as of a child-like innocence; but, perhaps, she was better as she was in the old story. She was, at any rate, less conventional, and a woman who felt herself married to *Paolo* rather than *Giovanni*, might have as naturally betrayed herself as a bewildered child. However, the question for criticism is the success or failure of Mr.

Phillips on his own ground, and it seems to me that his success is such as one who wishes the poetic drama well may rejoice in.

V.

Not having seen either of Mr. Phillips's plays on the stage, it is as a reader with faith in the literary future of the theatre that I rejoice in them. He and M. Rostand have, on their respective levels, contributed to assure this. Romanticism, as the French conceived it seventy years ago, was poetical, and M. Rostand has achieved a romanticistic success in the spirit of the earlier eighteen-thirties. Romance, as the English imagined it in the great revolt against classicism, farther back in the last century, was poetic, and Mr. Phillips, so far as he has succeeded, has succeeded in the romantic spirit of Leigh Hunt, of Shelby, of Keats, of Wordsworth, of Talfourd, of Byron—poets by no means of the same quality, but of the same impulse. So far as M. Rostand and Mr. Phillips have possessed themselves of the theatre, they have taken it back to the time when it was still believed that the theatre must be literary.

But it must not be supposed that they are reforming the stage. The stage was already reformed. As poetry, Mr. Pinero's "Notorious Mrs. Ebbesmith" is greater than Mr. Phillips's "Paolo and Francesca," and a more heart-breaking tragedy than his "Herod" is the "Hännele" of Herr Hauptmann. *Un Drama Nuevo* of the Spanish dramatist, Estebanez, is a nobler melodrama on the romanticistic lines than "Cyrano de Bergerac"; and one hour of Ibsen in "Ghosts" or the "Wild Duck" or "Little Eyolf," or "Hedda Gabler," is full of more ennobling terror, more regenerative pathos, than all that both these poets have done. But, in remembering their betters, we must not depreciate the work of these poets. Perhaps in them the drama has usefully come to its literary consciousness, and, if it is now more boldly than ever before insisting upon recognition as literature, it is to the advantage, not only of the future poets, but of the present poets, whose work has sometimes seemed too good for the stage.

W. D. HOWELLS.